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Housekeeper's Chat

Thursday, September 4, 1930

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Subject: Getting House Plants Ready for Winter. Information from W. R. Beattie, Bureau of Plant Industry, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

Bulletins available: F. B. 157, The Propagation of Plants, and F. B. 1495, Insect Enemies of the Flower Garden.

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It is nothing short of miraculous, the knack some women seem to have with gardens and house plants. There's my friend Mrs. Chapman. I never saw lovelier porch boxes, and house plants, than she has. Summer and winter, her house has green growing things around it. And they are green and growing - none of those sickly, spindly plants that make you feel sorry for them.

The other day I went over to see Mrs. Chapman, and ask her just how she did it. I found her shelling beans on her porch. So I started right in.

"What do you do with your house plants in winter time?" I asked her. "You have so many nice plants, and you never seem to have trouble keeping them when cold weather comes, do you?"

"No, I don't, Aunt Sammy," replied Mrs. Chapman, dropping her work for a few minutes. "You see, we have that large east window, and the sunny south window. They are both good places for plants in winter. Then I discard some of the plants that I have during the summer, and keep only those that are suitable for wintering over in the house. Take that big fern, for instance. When cold weather comes, I will trim off most of the fronds and set it down cellar, giving it just a little water from time to time, to keep it alive. If I lose it, it won't matter, because I have plenty of others. It makes a nice show here on the porch during the summer months, but it is too large for keeping in the house over winter."

"Those begonias," she continued, "were both started from small cuttings that a friend gave me early in the summer. I potted them in nice sandy loam soil. They rooted, and you see how beautifully they are growing. They will bloom during the winter and help to brighten up my living room. That small-leaved begonia is known as Gloria of Loraine, and it is one of the best bloomers for the house during the winter."

"I have four maidenhair ferns, you see. These have all come by dividing a maidenhair fern a friend gave me 3 or 4 years ago. I'm going to give two of these to my neighbors this fall, and keep two for the sunny south window next winter..

"Then I have 2 or 3 small Boston ferns that will be about the right size for the

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house during the winter. I started these ferns by taking off-shoots from the older plants early in the spring, and keeping them in a partially shaded place in my flower bed until time to take them into the house. This summer they made a splendid root growth, but they have very small tops. That is the way I want them.

When they are taken into the house, they are in good condition to grow, and make fine specimen plants. As soon as the nights get too cool for them outdoors, I'll put them in the coldframe, and plunge the pots in clean sand to keep them from drying out. Then a little later I'll move them into the house."

"How often do you water your plants?" I asked.

"As often as they are thirsty," replied Mrs. Chapman. "This may be once a day or twice a day, depending upon the weather. If it is very hot and dry, I water them in the morning, and again early in the evening. But as a rule, the morning waterings are enough. Plants are very much like people, in the way they get thirsty. You have to be guided by weather conditions."

"Have you seen Mrs. Green's plants lately", asked Mrs. Chapman. Her husband has been keeping house for himself. I asked him last night if he had watered her plants. He said he watered them 2 or 3 days ago, and he thought perhaps he had better go home right then and give them another watering. I told him I thought so too. Also I told him the story about the man whose wife was away for a month in the summer time, and before leaving cautioned him to feed the cat, and water the plants, every day. When he heard that she was coming home, he went to look for the cat, but could not find it. He also proceeded to water the plants. But only dead plants remained to be watered.

"People who are successful with house plants," Mrs. Chapman continued, "give them a little water at rather frequent intervals, but are careful not to overdo the watering. Of course, there is a great difference in the water requirements of the various kinds of plants. Some plants, like cacti, want to be kept comparatively dry. That is their natural way of living, and if you keep them too wet they will die, just as other plants, that require plenty of water, would die if you did not water them except at long periods."

"What about potting and repotting winter house plants?" I asked Mrs. Chapman next.

"Plants that are being prepared for keeping in the house over winter, Aunt Sammy, should be repotted in good soil, rather early in the season. This is much better than waiting until it is time to take them in the house. If the soil needs refreshing, it is a good plan to scrape off some of the top soil from around the plants, and add a layer of fresh soil. This gives the plants additional food, and makes the pots look full and neat. The soil, however, should be at least half an inch below the top of the pot, to provide space for watering. Before taking your plants indoors this fall, remove all broken, yellowed, or inferior leaves. And be sure that there are no scale insects, or plant lice on the foliage. If there is any indication of insects first give the plants a thorough washing with soapy water, then use some insecticide, like nicotine sulphate, or pyrethrum extract, mixed

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with water according to the directions on the package. Give the plants one or two treatments with that before you take them into the house."

"Here's another good point about house plants," Mrs. Chapman went on. She was shelling beans again, so I didn't feel a bit guilty about taking so much of her time. "About a week before the porch plants are taken in the house for the winter, they should be given a light watering with liquid manure. This can be made by immersing a small bag of dairy barn manure in enough water to cover it thoroughly. After the manure has soaked in the water for 3 or 4 days, the bag can be drawn out and allowed to drain. This liquid is excellent for watering the plants. Of course, there will be a disagreeable odor for a few days. That is why liquid manure is best applied a week or so before taking the plants into the house. Nothing like it, though, to give the plants a vigorous start, and add freshness to their foliage during the short, dark days of fall.

"If you can't get liquid manure, then add one tablespoonful of nitrate of soda to a gallon of water, and water the plants lightly with this solution. As a matter of fact, the nitrate of soda solution can be used perhaps once a month to advantage, and it has no disagreeable odor. Be careful, however, not to overdo the use of nitrate of soda, or the application of any chemical fertilizer. A little is all right, but be careful you don't overdo it."

"What is the charm you cast on plants, after you get them in the house in the fall, Mrs. Chapman," I asked her.

"Charm? Aunt Sammy. There isn't any charm about it. I just give them good care, and try to make them comfortable. Plants need plenty of room in the house. If you crowd them together, the individual plants will not get enough air and sunshine. Besides, where plants are crowded closely together, insects have a better chance to get in their mischief. And plants want to be reasonably cool, in the house. Don't think that because the air is chilly outside plants want it to be hot indoors. Let the change be gradual, and don't keep house plants in a temperature higher than that of the ordinary living room. In fact, cooler rooms will be more comfortable for house plants. But right now, the main thing is to get the plants in a good thrifty condition, ready to come indoors before frost.

Mrs. Chapman's beans were finished. It was time for me to meet Billy, and help him buy some new school shoes. As I looked back, I could just see her white wavy hair about the begonias. When I drop into her sunny living room in February, those same begonias will still be blooming. Maybe she doesn't think she has a special knack with house plants. But I do.

Tomorrow: A September Sunday Evening Supper.

